DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 851 CS 204 042

AUTHOR Heinig, Ruth Beall
TITLE Creative Drama as an Aid in Children's Develcpment of Communication Strategies.
PUB DATE Apr 77
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Conference on Language Arts in the Elementary School (9th, Phoenix, Arizona, April 22-24, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Development; Children; *Creative Dramatics; Elementary Education; Information Theory; Language Arts; Nonverbal Communication; *Pragmatics; *Speech Communication; *Teaching Techniques; Verbal Communication

ABSTRACT

Pragmatics, or functional communicatien, refers to the transactions that occur between people, or the actual performance of language in social contexts. This paper discusses several functional communication theories, applies these theories to the education of children, and offers a number of practical techniques for teaching creative dramatics. Because the classroom provides the logical testing place for children to experience dynamic verbal and nonverbal expression, the paper suggests and describes the following activities for exploring and implementing creative drama in teaching: story dramatization, narrative pantomime, improvisation, categorization of situations, frozen pictures, add-ons in role playing, and conversations. Each of these activities encourage children to explore a situation, evaluate the appropriateness of behavior, and recognize the consequences of their chosen behavior. (MAI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Creative Drama as an Aid in Children's Development of Communication Strategies

Ruth Beall Heinig

ED151851

Within the last twenty years, much language research has taken place. A great deal is now known about how language is learned, and efforts are being made to discover the appropriate methods of instruction. But what we know is primarily related to phonology (sound production), syntax (word order) and semantics (meaning). When it is said, as we have so often heard, that children have acquired the basic rules of their language before they enter kindergarten, we are referring essentially to the three areas above.

More recently, there has been an emphasis on an area of language learning called "pragmatics." Pragmatics refers to the use of language in a variety of communication situations, giving consideration to the participants, the setting (time and place), the topic, the task, and the preceding events (Hopper and Naremore, 1973). The effectiveness of a communicator is more often measured by the appropriateness of what is said rather than the specific vocabulary which is used, the articulation of the speech sounds or the grammatical phrasing employed. It is just this sort of communication competence, defined by Hymes as the way in which a child "perceives and categorizes the social situations of his world and differentiates his way of speaking accordingly," that language researchers feel needs further investigation (1970, p. 84).

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

In a broader sense, pragmatics, or functional communication, refers to the transactions that occur between people--the actual performance of language in social contexts. How these situations are dealt with, what is said verbally and/or nonverbally, is referred to as communication strategy. Allen and Brown (1976) identify five large families of communication functions which embrace the dominant uses of communication in everyday life. They include controlling, feeling, informing, ritualizing, and imagining.

CS204042

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Ruth Beall Heinig TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND THE ERIC SYSTEM CONTRACTORS."

Now, just as children acquire the rules of language as soon as they ~~being~~ begin to speak, so they also begin to learn about strategies at a very early age (Rodnick and Wood, 1973; Bates, 1976). For example, we know that children employ temper tantrums, pleading, threats, bargaining--sometimes effectively and sometimes not--remarkably soon in their language careers. Children modify their speech depending on whether they are speaking to baby brother, father, or grandmother, and they speak differently to each of these people under different circumstances. But as Hopper and Naremore tell us, "Learning to speak appropriately is like learning how to play chess well. There is no end to the task; it continues throughout life" (1973, p. 59).

In the acquiring of this kind of competence, four principal factors are considered (Connolly and Bruner, 1974). To be competent a person needs (1) a repertoire of experiences (2) the ability to make critical choices from that repertoire (3) the ability to use suitable behaviors in performing desired tasks and (4) the ability to evaluate performance objectively--thereby enriching the repertoire of experiences. (These are not four steps which follow in an ordered sequence, but which may occur simultaneously.) Communication instruction should provide experiences that expand the repertoire of these strategies, particularly for those situations which are important to children. They need to learn to judge which strategies are most appropriate for a specific situation at a given moment in time. Children need the opportunity to experience themselves in dynamic interaction in both verbal and nonverbal expression and then to evaluate those acts in terms of their appropriateness and their interpersonal effectiveness, i.e. its satisfaction to the child and to others.

It is my contention that creative drama experiences can provide an invaluable educational opportunity in this area of language building and communication competence. Obviously because creative drama utilizes both nonverbal (pantomime) and verbal tools, it focuses on communication. But it is the purpose of this paper to emphasize creative drama's contribution to children's understanding of human interaction and to suggest some ways in which this might be more effectively accomplished.

Creative drama, because it helps children "understand a social situation more thoroughly or to experience imaginatively via identification in social situations" (Heathcote, 1970, p. 1077), provides a stage for rehearsing and experimenting with various human interaction situations. Although some writers distinguish the role-played event from the actual situation (e.g. Allen and Brown, 1976, p. 252), others consider them quite similar. For example, Erving Goffman (1959), a contemporary social psychologist, interprets social behavior as if it were a dramatic

performance, not unlike Shakespeare's "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" notion. While we don't use the same acting techniques as a professional performer might, we do play roles, we learn ways of coping with each other, and we might even be said to "stage events." In Transactional Analysis, for example, we are said to play out a "life script" (Jongeward and James, 1973). Wood makes the statement, "Whereas professional actors must use their abilities to portray other persons, our young social actors must use their abilities to learn about other persons so that they can portray themselves in the most successful and rewarding ways" (1976, p. 254). She further suggests that children be given opportunities to observe others and discuss how they function within their roles. They need to experiment and analyze, she claims, in order to acquire a repertoire of language strategies that "enables them to deal successfully with characters and scenes they encounter in day-to-day communication 'performances'" (p. 255).

It seems to me that there are several ways in which creative drama helps children in developing communication strategies. As children watch each other playing out situations, they can see communication strategies in action. As they play the situations themselves, they are rehearsing a given strategy or they may experiment with a new strategy or strategies. What is particularly valuable, I believe, is the fact that they can broaden their repertoire of strategies and rehearse and test in a secure environment "without paying reality's price" as Barnes has noted (1968, p. 14). They need not fear the literal consequence of being sent to the dungeon by a ruler for some misdeed, for

example. At the same time, however, they can see that the misdeed could provoke such a consequence.

A further point about the creative drama environment relates to the dimension of psychological security. All writers of creative drama methods have spoken of the importance, in one way or another, of such security in providing an effective learning atmosphere--one that allows for freedom of expression within logical confines. The nature of the activity itself has demanded this concern, and it is no less crucial in the area of language experimentation being discussed here.

Let us now look at some of the specific activities that might provide for an examination of communication strategies. Actually, many of the activities which already exist in numerous books are useful for the study of this aspect of language, although they may not have been looked at in that light.

For example, one valuable activity for exploring communication strategies is story dramatization. Literature supplies many fascinating examples of communication strategies in action, and bringing those materials to life can be one of the best ways to learn how people deal with such situations. Recently, unfortunately, there has been a notion that creative drama has been too dependent on literature and that it is more creative for children to make up their own drama materials. Furner, for example, says, "Classroom drama must be spontaneous and self or group generated rather than being the literal interpretation of a known story [italics my own], oral reading of a play from the basal reader, or rote presentation of an adult-scripted play" (1974, p. 41). But there are numerous scenes in stories, both the classical and the modern, which demonstrate specific communication problems and the

characters' employment of communication strategies to deal with those situations. Indeed, those stories which lend themselves to dramatic portrayal do so beeause they focus on these dramatic moments of human confrontations.

In essence, the story presents the aspects of pragmatics mentioned earlier. It presents the situation, the participants, the setting (time and place), the topic, the task, and the preceding events. Consider, for example, Tom Sawyer conning his friends into whitewashing the fence; Frances' bargaining for her money after she has been duped out of it (Russell Hoban's A Bargain for Frances); or The Sneetches (Dr. Seuss) without stars on their bellies trying to gain acceptance from those who do. It seems to me that it is important for children to hear these stories, see them played by their classmates, and to try out the scenes for themselves, playing as many sides of the story or the characters as possible. The children know the framework of the communication context after hearing and discussing it. They fill in the appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors that are a part of this communication context and bring alive and rehearse a given event.

Even if the scenes are performed quite literally, it seems to me that the children experience a very satisfying communication exercise in an interesting and very efficient way. I recently viewed a videotape of a group of second graders playing "Cinderella."[1] The children were very secure in their simple pantomime and dialogue that told the story on their level of understanding. "Cinderella, get me my lipstick!" "Cinderella, get my mink!" said the stepsisters. The Prince asked, "Do you want to dance?" Cinderella said, "Sure," and they clasped hands

and rocked back and forth. These are the communication rituals of that particular story in that particular time and culture, and the children obviously understood them and felt confident in playing them. It also seems to me that when those rituals are played out satisfactorily, other rituals can be learned and added to the repertoire.

Enacting stories which are essentially pantomime can also be useful. We have identified a number of stories and poems suitable for this technique which we label "narrative pantomime" (Heinig and Stillwell, 1974). This activity simply uses literature that has interesting pantomimic action that can be read by the teacher "as is" or with some editing so that children can enact it all together. In these stories, nonverbal strategies particularly can be noted.

The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Potter, for example, is an illustration of narrative pantomime. In it Peter is faced with a major problem and several subproblems which he attempts to solve. At one point, he cries over his predicament, but as no one is around to assist, he finds that crying isn't the answer. He sees a cat at another point in the story, but the nonverbal clues all but cry out "Danger!" The cat is eyeing goldfish in a pool and her tail tip is switching menacingly. Peter also remembers what his cousin Benjamin Bunny has told him about cats and moves on. It would appear that by playing out these moments the children experience a character in a conflict situation analyzing his/her problem and choosing a particular course of action--in the case above, an appropriate one. The teacher's choice of story or poem is his/her own and depends on the particular situations he/she thinks the class will find useful. Other suggestions might be:

"Foul Shot" by Edwin A. Hoey; "Gertrude McFuzz" by Dr. Seuss; Gregory by Robert Bright; "Man Alone" SRA Reader; or What Do You Do, Dear? by Sesyle Joslin.

This is not to say that a story cannot be used to explore other possible communication contexts and strategies. Indeed, this is what is happening when a story is elaborated upon as Stewig calls "improvisation," a process which takes the story or the characters beyond the given storyline or when new endings are explored (1974, p. 66). For example: What would happen if the Woodcutter didn't show up in the story of "Little Red Riding Hood?" What do you suppose Goldilocks tells her mother when she arrives home? What might be another way that Goggles by Ezra Jack Keats could end?

Lipson (1973) has developed an interesting technique for improvisation, using well-known stories as a base. She brings up new evidence, so to speak, and a story is explored in this new light. For example, a court hearing might be a setting for exploring whether or not Hansel and Gretel were guilty in the murder of a certain Mrs. Salem (there is only the word of the children that the woman was a witch). A number of crimes were committed--trespassing, stealing, child abuse, etc.--which require investigation. Lipson selects volunteers to play the roles of the characters in the story and adds character witnesses for the accusers and the defendants, while the rest of the class plays the enraged citizenry trying to get at the bottom of the story. An excellent language arts experience, this technique also explores human interaction and confrontation in a most fascinating way.

Another activity might involve dramatizing situations which are appropriate for specific strategic behavior. Wood (1976) suggests that children may learn communication competence by categorization as they do for other aspects of language learning. For example, a child may have a category of "be quiet" situations or of "be polite" situations. The dramatized scenes for the former might be: "In pairs, can you enact a situation that demonstrates the usefulness of 'being quiet'?" Here the children might enact being scolded by someone in authority; being in the presence of someone who is sick; not being prepared for class and staying quiet in the hopes that the teacher won't call on you, etc. For the "be polite" situations the scenes might include: asking a favor, receiving a gift, meeting a friend of your mother's, etc.

Another activity which is useful is "frozen pictures." Children are asked to group themselves and pose in such a manner as to indicate the interrelationships of the group in given situations. Again these may be based on literature: "In threes, show me Cinderella and her stepsisters" (Barton and Booth, 1973); on social studies, "Let's create a frozen picture of Lee surrendering to Grant at Appomatox, each with a retinue of soldiers;" or an everyday event, such as: "Let's create a frozen picture of a traffic accident and see if we can tell who caused it and how the others feel about the situation." This technique allows for a discussion of the nonverbal aspects of body posture, facial expression, proxemics (space between individuals), and body orientation.

It is also useful to add to this activity letting the scenes come to life in moving or talking pictures. This may be done by

asking each individual frozen member to say one line appropriate to the situation and his/her nonverbal communication; or the scene may move so that the next event and consequence may be examined until the leader freezes the picture again; or the scene may be improvised with all players contributing dialogue and action appropriately.

Exploration of communication strategies may also be done using Spolin's (1963) technique of "Add-Ons." In this exercise, one or several persons begin a situation in pantomime or improvisation. Others add on their ideas to the situation as it develops, following certain consequences. For example, one person may be caught in a revolving door of a department store. Other characters in the scene might be onlookers, a floor-walker, store manager, store detective, etc. How the characters choose to develop the scene will depend on the preceding events and the consequences they perceive of those events.

Another technique involves the teacher playing, as Heathcote describes it, "in role" (Wagner, 1976). With younger children it may be crucial for the teacher to play this catalyst role, as evidenced by Wright's research (1972). The technique appears to be equally significant for disadvantaged children (Smilansky, 1968). This procedure allows the teacher to set up communication situations for children to experience as he/she presses or challenges thought. Again, these situations may be stimulated by story material; for example, recently I played a tail salesperson trying to sell new tails to six-year-old bears who had lost theirs while playing the legend, "Why the Bear is Stumpy Tailed." An important part of this technique is to press children to think further. "What color would you like? Oh, I'm sorry, I

just sold my last black tail to your neighbor." "Now, all my bear tails have been sold, but how about this lovely silver fox tail? I think you'd look grand in it, don't you?"

This type of "in role" playing may also be done in other contexts. Wagner cites an extended example of Heathcote's playing a governor of a colony calling in the colonists one by one to pay their taxes. Each was to decide whether their family had enough money and if not, why. Her stern demeanor and her unsympathetic character not only allowed the children an opportunity to relive an experience in history, but also to see the consequences of their various strategies (Wagner, 1976, pp. 84-86). Although Heathcote does not add the dimension of discussing strategies and evaluating their appropriateness, the activity could easily take on this goal.

Heathcote does, however, employ a technique which may be valuable in exploring consequences. She is very willing to follow through on a course of action which other leaders might be more reluctant to pursue. For example, if a group wishes to "make a play" about killing a President, she will go along with them (Wagner, 1976). But she doesn't stop with that action and, instead, presses the "drama" further. "They will be trapped into facing living with a murder on their conscience, the problem of succession of power, and the feelings of a family bereaved. This in turn can lead them to examine their own values" (p. 55). While this example may seem rash and while the technique employed may be uncomfortable for many creative drama leaders, it is, I think, an attempt to get at the goal I have outlined here.

In some cases, leaders may prefer to set up situations which the children enact on their own. Brian Way (1969) uses an A-B dialogue

technique; A wants one thing and B another. Each must try to convince the other of his/her point of view. For example, A tries to explain his/her tardiness to B who is reluctant to believe the excuses. Or, Patriots at the Second Continental Congress try to convince the Loyalists that independence is more important than loyalty to England. Or, one child tries to convince another to shoplift for the fun of it. If desired, the teacher can challenge the students to resolve the situation within a given time limit so that a specific outcome or a compromise can be demonstrated.

A final technique with conversational scenes such as those described above is to allow the class to pair up and "rehearse" or explore ideas for a few minutes simultaneously. Then perhaps five volunteering couples will share their ideas. The teacher numbers the couples and calls out, "Couple #1," giving that couple a chance to converse until the teacher calls on another couple. This technique could prove to be useful in demonstrating the various directions a conversation may go, given that a variety of strategies are employed.

Briefly, then, these are just some of the examples of creative drama activities which might be used to explore the area of functional communication. Further study is needed in order to identify the strategy categories which communicators employ, and to evaluate the effectiveness of each. We also need to learn more about how children acquire communication strategies and at what ages the various strategies are learned. In any event, it seems important for language arts programs to focus on this newly recognized area of communication study and examine the role of creative drama in its implementation. We may also need to reexamine our present techniques as well as traditional ones in the light of this area of language learning.

REFERENCES

Allen, R. R. and Kenneth L. Brown, eds. Developing Communicative Competence in Children: A Report of the Speech Communication Association's National Project on Speech Communication Competencies. Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, 1976.

Barnes, Douglas, ed. Drama in the English Classroom. Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1968.

Barton, Robert and David Booth, "Do Swans Really Eat Fudgesicles?" Children's Literature in Education, 2 (May, 1973), 13-24.

Bates, Elizabeth. Language and Context: The Acquisition of Pragmatics. New York: Academic Press, 1976.

Connolly, K. S. and J. S. Bruner. The Growth of Competence. New York: Academic Press, 1974.

Furner, Beatrice A. "Creative Dramatics in a Language Arts Program: Personal Growth and Self-Expression," Elementary English, 51 (January, 1974), 41-44.

Goffman, Erving. Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Coubleday Company, Inc., 1959.

Heinig, Ruth Beall and Lyda Stillwell. Creative Dramatics for the Classroom Teacher. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1974.

Hopper, Robert and Rita C. Naremore, Children's Speech: A Practical Introduction to Communication Development. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

Hymes, Dell, "On Communicative Competence," The Mechanisms of Language Development, R. Huxley and E. Ingram, eds. London: CIBA Foundation, 1970.

Jongeward, Dorothy and Muriel James. Winning With People: Group Exercises in Transactional Analysis. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1973.

Lipson, Greta B. "Trial of Hansel and Gretel: A Language Arts Experience," Alternative Strategy in English Classrooms, M. Robert Graham, ed. Michigan Council of Teachers of English, 1973. 60-63.

Rodnick, Royce and Barbara Wood, "The Communication Strategies of Children," The Speech Teacher, 22 (1973), 114-24.

Smilansky, Sara. The Effects of Sociodramatic Play on Disadvantaged Pre-School Children. New York: John Wiley, 1968.

Spolin, Viola. Improvisation for the Theatre. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1963.

Stewig, John Warren. "Drama: Integral Part of the Language Arts," Elementary English, 51 (January, 1974), 66-71.

Wagner, Betty Jane. Dorothy Heathcote: Drama As a Learning Medium. Washington, D. C.: National Educational Association, 1976.

Wood, Barbara S., Children and Communication: Verbal and Nonverbal Language Development. Englewood Cliffs: New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976.

Way, Brian. Development Through Drama. New York: Humanities Press, 1966.

Wright, Lin, "Creative Dramatics and the Development of Role-Taking in the Elementary Classroom," Elementary English, 51 (January, 1974), 89-93.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The videotape is one of a series made in connection with a project entitled "Drama as an Important Classroom Tool," being conducted by University of Wisconsin-Greenbay and North Eastern Wisconsin Instructional Services Television. Project Coordinator, Eileen Littig.